

R 171210Z MAR 09
FM AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2726
INFO AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK
AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

UNCLAS ST PETERSBURG 000028

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: RS PGOV

SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA WINS THROUGHOUT NORTHWEST RUSSIA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Numerous elections were held in Northwest Russia on March 1st at the oblast, city, and local levels. With turnout low, United Russia won everywhere resoundingly with only minor setbacks. The Communists and Liberal Democrats had relatively poor showings, and other opposition groups were similarly marginalized. The elections have demonstrated the efficacy of the Kremlin's and United Russia's powerful electoral machine, which makes it increasingly difficult for other parties to compete. End Summary.

¶2. (U) United Russia (YR) won the Arkhangelsk Oblast legislative elections with a 38% turnout. United Russia will hold 39 of the 62 legislative seats (62%, almost a constitutional majority). A Just Russia (SR) came the second with nine seats, and the less successful Communists (KPRF) and Liberal Democrats (LDPR) captured six and two seats respectively. The remaining six seats were won by independent candidates in single mandate districts.

¶3. (U) Nenets Autonomous District (NAO) was the sole dark spot in the region for United Russia. Although YR did win the region, it failed to garner more than half the vote (winning just over 42%) - its lowest figure nationwide. However, the way the seats are distributed in the district gives an advantage to the winning party, and thus YR will have an absolute majority in the 11-member Assembly with six seats. Of the remaining five seats, the Communists and Liberal Democrats each won two and A Just Russia the remaining one. Recent changes in the NAO election laws had eliminated single mandate district seats, so the Assembly seats were filled proportionately in accordance with the party ballot vote. Turnout in NAO was 49%, which was dramatically lower than the previous regional election turnout of 60%.

¶4. (SBU) The first round of the mayoral election in Murmansk was inconclusive and required a runoff. Incumbent Mayor Mikhail Savchenko won 31% of the vote, and in second place was ex-Vice Governor Sergey Subbotin with 24%. Both candidates are members of YR, and the local party apparatus officially supported the incumbent Savchenko. However, Oblast Governor Yuriy Yevdokimov, also of YR, appeared to support his protegee Subbotin, and criticized his party's pro-Savchenko campaign. The March 15th runoff election, with 40 % turnout, resulted in a victory for Subbotin who received 61% of the vote. United Russia doesn't seem to be taking this loss lightly, however. Sergey Volodin, a federal leader of United Russia, blames Governor Yevdokimov for the party's election loss, and Volodin has spoken of sanctions against Yevdokimov as well as of possible legal measures that will be taken to cancel the election results.

¶5. (U) In St. Petersburg, local council elections were held in 108 of the 111 municipal units. United Russia swept the field with 1,145 winning candidates (75% of the total). A Just Russia won 107, the Communists 27, and the Liberal Democrats just 13. 195 seats were won by technically non-partisan candidates - of these, six are members of Yabloko. Around a thousand candidates (more than 20% of those who wanted to run) were unable to register for the election and so did not appear on the ballot. Among those were hundreds of SR and CPR candidates, half of all Yabloko candidates, and a number of independent candidates who represented opposition movements and local interest groups. In contrast, almost all of United Russia's candidates were successfully registered, with their

registration failure rate below 1%.

¶6. (SBU) A leading St. Petersburg electoral analyst opined to us that these elections in NW Russia confirmed already existing electoral trends. According to him, the Kremlin is now able to set certain election outcome plans for the regions, and the regions can usually carry out those plans. He also believes that election results depend largely on the extent of YR administrative control over the electoral process. For example, the results in Arkhangelsk Oblast (a clean sweep for YR) were more or less predictable. On the other hand, the poor performance of United Russia in NAO showed that a different sort of mindset was also in play. Our interlocutor said he had heard the Kremlin initially expected United Russia to win 60% of the votes in NAO. But, shortly before election day, that target was dropped to avoid possible discontent amongst the residents of the okrug who would find such a high figure for UR unbelievable given YR's general unpopularity there. So, it seemed Moscow chose to tolerate a lower percentage of the vote in order to make the results more credible to voters. The entire process was indicative of YR's complete control over the electoral process.

¶7. (SBU) Our interlocutor also thought the relatively bad results for the Communists and the Liberal Democrats not unexpected. He believes the KPRF had already discredited itself among many of its voters, while the LDPR's social base has always been rather narrow in NW Russia as well as in the rest of the country. Zhirinovskiy's party seems to have lost the backing of YR power brokers, and it is ill-equipped to counter this situation. The LDPR was initially prevented from even participating in the NAO elections, and Zhirinovskiy personally had to intervene at the federal level in order for his party to be allowed to compete. Zhirinovskiy severely criticized the election process, which was unusual for him, which was apparently done out of frustration with his party's poor showing. Our interlocutor suggested that there might have been a significant amount of vote tampering against LDPR, and that it was even possible that some LDPR votes were counted as A Just Russia votes. If this is true, then our contact believes Zhirinovskiy's party's long term prospects are not very bright.

¶8. (SBU) Commenting on A Just Russia's performance, our interlocutor said the party had been inconsistent in its campaigning. SR actively campaigned in Arkhangelsk Oblast, although its campaign there was focused on a few popular local figures rather than on any ideological content. But, in NAO SR did not campaign at all, and many voters probably learned about its participation in the election only when they saw the party's name on the ballot in the polling booth.

¶9. (SBU) Our contact also thought that Northwest oblasts are significantly different from the typical Russian oblast in terms of relations between United Russia and the governors. Whereas in most oblasts the governors and regional branches of United Russia act in concert, in a number of Northwest oblasts the governors seem to behave differently from the way their local YR branches would like them to. Murmansk was a perfect example of this type of tension, as Governor Yevdokimov and the oblast's YR apparatus supported competing candidates in the mayoral election.

¶10. (SBU) In St. Petersburg itself, our interlocutor sees three major forces which all worked against opposition candidates and ensured United Russia's sweeping victory. First, the city government worked hard to ensure a YR victory. Second, members of the City Legislative Assembly (of whom a majority are also members of United Russia) were also interested in having "cooperative" (read: YR majority) municipal councils elected. Third, local building and utility conglomerates ("Zhilkomservis") were reluctant to see opposition candidates seated on the municipal councils, apparently fearing those candidates would attempt to strengthen the councils' position vis-a-vis the conglomerates. Our contact also thought that widespread election fraud had been committed which cemented YR's decisive municipal victory. However, the sheer extent and brazenness of the fraud has led to a number of fraud accusations, which are currently working their way through the St. Petersburg legal system. Our interlocutor believes the

accusations will shortly be forgotten and lost in legal limbo while the election results will stand.

¶11. (SBU) Comment. The March 1st elections in Northwest Russia showed that, by manipulating the levers of power, United Russia is able to easily defeat opponents in regional and municipal elections. When the administrative machinery fails or is divided in its loyalties, as happened in Murmansk, YR's electoral prospects are more doubtful even if the party's overall dominance is not. United Russia's electoral machinery is still working out its kinks, as the significant number of fraud accusations in St. Petersburg showed. Nevertheless, the most likely prognosis is continued YR domination of politics at all levels throughout the region, for the foreseeable future.
End Comment.

GWALTNEY